

Bild / Ding / Kunst

Herausgegeben von
Gerhard Wolf
in Zusammenarbeit mit
Kathrin Müller



Italienische Forschungen
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Herausgegeben von
Alessandro Nova und Gerhard Wolf



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Bissera V. Pentcheva

From Dance to Chant: The Byzantine Transformation of the Concept of *Choros**

A golden sundial or a sunflower of rays, its beams metaphorically transform into slender female figures (Farbtafel 22). They wear in alternating order red, blue, and golden garments; their hands extended; their long sleeves falling heavily towards the floor; golden belts dangling to the side. Only their fan-like head-dresses sprout above the circuit of extended arms. All dancers advance with the same step, the left leg before the right. In a reversal of the perfect order of the female ring dance or *choros*, the center emerges in an asymmetrical arrangement of eight musicians, each one holding a different musical instrument.

Lines of text run above the circle of the dancers' extended hands. These are verses from Ode 1 (Ex. XV, 1 – 19) composed by Moses and danced by his sister Miriam, celebrating the Jews' miraculous crossing of the Red Sea.¹ Stasis and movement are paradoxically entwined: while the women keep their heads and upper bodies facing the viewer, their legs turn to the side, gently following a counterclockwise direction and embodying in their chiastic stance, the form of the letter X, in Greek pronounced as »chi«. At the same time, their movement is counter-»danced« by the verses of the first Ode inscribed above their joined arms; these lines run in a clockwise fashion. The symmetry of the female *dance* contrasts against the asymmetry of the male musicians in the center. The latter are identified with an inscription calling them a »choirs of prophets« who sing and play different instruments in praise of God.²

What significance does *choros* carry in Byzantine culture? In Archaic Greece *choros* identified both the song and dance unfolding in the propitiatory ritual around the altar, which could trigger divine re-

* I thank Gerhard Wolf and Nicola Suthor for the invitation to participate in this book project of la Direzione Wolf and Annette Hoffmann for her patience in the editing process.

¹ Ex 15,1 – 18, and Odes 1,1 – 19. For the Greek, I have used: *Septuaginta*, ed. by Alfred Rahlfs [Stuttgart 1935], Reprint Stuttgart 1975.

² οὗτοι οἱ χοροὶ ὑπ’ αὐτῶν προφήτων τῶν εἰσὶν διαφόροις ὅργάνοις ἔδοντες καὶ ψάλλοντες καὶ ὀρχούμενοι εἰς δόξαν θεοῦ. The Greek of the dedicatory inscription is in Ernest T. DeWald: *The illustrations in the manuscripts of the Septuagint*, Vol. III,/2, Princeton 1941, p. 41.

sponse.³ Byzantium inherited this ancient *choros* but never performed it as a dance in the space of the church. *Choros* had a visual dimension manifested in pictorial representations of the Anastasis or in the prayers circumambulating the frames of icons and reliquaries.⁴ Yet, it is the acoustic dimension of *choros* as a chant that Byzantium privileged. It is not surprising that the word *choros* in this example identifies the male musicians rather than the female dancers.⁵

The miniatures and the text of Vatican City, Bibliotheca Apostolica Vaticana (Ms. Vat. gr. 752), were first published by DeWald in 1941.⁶ Later on, Ioli Kalavrezou, Nicolette Trahoulia, and Shalom Shabar presented their argument about the Psalter section of this manuscript as a church critique (of the patriarch Keroularios, 1043 – 1059) against the comportment of a series of emperors: Constantine IX Monomachos (1042 – 1056), Michael VI (1056 – 1057), Isaakios I Komnenos (1058 – 1059). According to this interpretation, the miniatures of the Psalter part (the first half of the manuscript) present a visual castigation of the emperor, and insist on the power of the patriarch to arbitrate over questions of politics, morals, and faith.⁷ Lastly, in a catalogue entry, Kalavrezou drew attention to the miniature of Miriam's dance (fol. 449v) suggesting that it represents a court dance.⁸ It is to this hypothesis that my essay now turns. What stands beyond the simple identification of dance, are the steps represented, how much of these body movements are indicated in the miniature?

Accustomed by Western Renaissance perspective, modern viewers of Byzantine images see them as flat and lacking illusionistic depth. While they eschew geometric perspective, Byzantine miniatures explore other means to convey a spatial and temporal three-dimensionality.⁹ Intertwining poetry with music and dance, the preface miniature on fol. 449v captures both a passage of time and the transformation of space.

As a visual gateway to the Old Testament Canticles or Odes, the image draws attention to the ritual significance of this poetry. The nine canonical odes form the structure of the Byzantine *kanon*, sung at *orthros* (the morning office).¹⁰ Each of the nine biblical canticles presents a model melody, *heirmos*.¹¹ Starting as early as the fifth century, but gaining momentum in the seventh and eight centuries in Jerusalem, new extra-scriptural poetry was composed that tied the liturgy better to the particular feast

³ On *choros* in the ancient tradition of archaic poetry and on the link between *choros* and magic, see C. Calame, *Choruses of Young Women in Ancient Greece. Their Morphology, Religious Role, and Social Functions*, London 1997, and the essays in Arion. A Journal of Humanities and the Classics, 3/1 (1994/95).

⁴ Nicoletta Isar, *Choros, The Dance of Adam. The Making of Byzantine Chorography. The Anthropology of the Choir of Dance in Byzantium*, Leiden, 2011 and Pentcheva, *The Sensual Icon: Space, Ritual, and the Senses in Byzantium*, University Park 2010, p. 45 – 56, 155 – 182.

⁵ Bissera V. Pentcheva: Hagia Sophia and Multisensory Aesthetics, *Gesta* 50/2, 2011, p. 93 – 111.

⁶ DeWald (see note 2), p. 41.

⁷ I. Kalavrezou, N. Trahoulia, S. Sabar: Critique of the emperor in the Vatican Psalter gr. 752, in: *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* XLVII, 1993, p. 195 – 219.

⁸ *The glory of Byzantium. Art and culture of the Middle Byzantine Era A.D. 843 – 1261*, exhibition catalogue ed. by Helen C. Evans/William D. Wixom, New York 1997, cat. no. 142, p. 206 f. (Ioli Kalavrezou).

⁹ On the Byzantine »proto-cubistic« arrangement of pictorial space, see Bissera V. Pentcheva: Visual textuality:

The Logos as pregnant body and building, in: *Res* XLV, 2004, p. 225 – 238.

¹⁰ Egon Wellesz: *A history of Byzantine music and hymnography* [Oxford 1949], Reprint Oxford 1961, p. 198 – 245; Henry Tillyard: *Byzantine music and hymnography*, London 1923, p. 19 – 32; Miloš Velimirović, Originality and innovation in Byzantine music, in: *Originality in Byzantine literature, art, and music*, ed. by Antony R. Littlewood, Oxford 1995, p. 189 f.; *Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium*, ed. Al. Kazhdan, New York/Oxford 1991, Vol. II, p. 1102.

¹¹ Ode 1: *Exodus* xv.1 – 19 (Moses's song of thanksgiving); Ode 2: *Deuteronomy* xxxii.1 – 43 (Moses's admonition before his death); Ode 3: *1 Samuel* ii.1 – 10 (prayer of Hannah, mother of Samuel); Ode 4: *Habakkuk* iii.2 – 19 (prayer of Habakkuk); Ode 5: *Isaiah* xxvi.9 – 19 (prayer of Isaiah); Ode 6: *Jonah* ii.2 – 9 (prayer of Jonah); Ode 7: *Daniel* iii.26 – 45 (prayer of Azariah), 52 – 6 (First Hymn of the Three Children); Ode 8: *Daniel* iii.57 – 88 (Hymn of the Three Children); Ode 9: *Luke* i.46 – 55 (song of the Virgin Mary: *Magnificat*), 68 – 79 (song of Zechariah: *Benedictus*).

of the day.¹² These hymns employed the musical design of the model stanza or *heirmos* of each canticle and composed new lines, known as *troparia*.¹³

What is the relationship of the preface miniature on fol. 449v to the performance of the Byzantine *kanon*? Can we see this image as a container of the ritual, a »jug« in which new poetry (*troparia*) can be poured in and sonified in accordance to the model *heirmos*? In linking this miniature with the concept of a container, this essay posits a link with Martin Heidegger's concept of the »Thing«.¹⁴ He identifies the »thing« as a jug: a container, whose main function is to gather. In turn, gathering manifests itself on the surface of the liquid contained by the jug; here the celestial is reflected in the terrestrial. Thus the »thing« operates through the mirror surface, a medium that enables the gathering of mortal and divine. Heidegger calls this condition »nearness«, a visual manifestation of the fourfold into the onefold: a gathering reified as an intangible and fleeting reflection. This essay will explore how the preface miniature on fol. 449v transcends our modern categories of art and the static, two-dimensional image in order to view the Byzantine representation as a »thing« – a container for a ritual that unfolds in time and space.

The verses of the canticle line the exterior frame of the circle dance, placed above the extended and joined hands of the dancers. The inscription above the head of the top center female figure gives the start; it reads: »Miriam, sister of Moses«.¹⁵ To the right (Miriam's left) begins the first verse, in Greek *stichos*:

Ἄσωμεν τῷ κυρίῳ
 ἐνδόξως γὰρ δεδόξασται
 ἵππον καὶ ἀναβάτην
 Ἄσωμεν τῷ κυρίῳ
 ἐνδόξως γὰρ δεδόξασται
 βοηθὸς καὶ σκεπαστῆς ἐγένετό μοι εἰς σωτηρίαν
 Ἄσωμεν τῷ κυρίῳ
 οὐτός μου θεός, καὶ δοξάσω
 Ἄσωμεν τῷ κυρίῳ
 κύριος συντρίβων πολέμους
 Ἄσωμεν τῷ κυρίῳ
 ἐπιλέκτους ἀναβάτας
 Ἄσωμεν τῷ κυρίῳ
 Η δεξιά σου, κύριε, δεδόξαστα ἐν ισχύι.¹⁶

Phrase/stichos 1. (Advance = Refrain) Let us sing to the Lord (Ex 15,1a)

Phrase 2. (A) for he is very greatly glorified (Ex 15,1b)

Phrase 3. (A) horse and rider (Ex 15,1c)

Phrase 4. (Reverse) Let us sing to the Lord (Ex 15,1a)

Phrase 5. (R) for he is very greatly glorified (Ex 15,1b)

Phrase 6. (A) he was for me helper and protector for salvation (Ex 15,2a)

Phrase 7. (R) Let us sing to the Lord (Ex 15,1a)

Phrase 8. (A) this is my God and I will glorify him (Ex 15,2b)

Phrase 9. (R) Let us sing to the Lord (Ex 15,1a)

Phrase 10. (A) the Lord crushing wars (Ex 15,3a)

Phrase 11. (R) Let us sing to the Lord (Ex 15,1a)

Phrase 12. (A) The chosen riders (Ex 15,4b)

Phrase 13. (R) Let us sing to the Lord (Ex 15,1a)

Phrase 14. (A) Thy right hand has been glorified in strength (Ex 15,6a).

In the performance of this text, the first *stichos* (Ex 15,1a) forms a refrain. It introduces each successive line (Ex 15,1b, c; Ex 15,2a,b; Ex 15,3a; Ex 15,4b; Ex 15,6a). In this way a cyclical structure emerges; it always comes back to the beginning (Ex 15,1a), forming a *perpetuum mobile*. The circle of fourteen verses is then visualized in the actual ring dance of fourteen maidens. The beginning is joined with the end; the last verse Ex 15,6 meets the first, Ex 15,1a, the two *stichoi*, flanking Miriam, completing the final pair, create a faux fifteenth line. It appears as if each female figure pronounces/sings her verse in a direction opposite her bodily movement; her voice lingering in the space already traversed by her feet. The natural advance of the poem is checked by the repeated return to the phrase 1 (Ex 15,1a). Can we read this structure spatially and choreographically? The sequence of verses along the circular periphery creates the following configuration: three paces in advance, followed by two in reverse (*stichoi* 1–3 all in advance; then *stichoi* 4 and 5 in reverse). The dance then continues with one step in advance followed by one in return repeated five times (*stichoi* 6 and 7; 8 and 9; 10 and 11; 12 and 13; finally 14 and 1). And then the whole system could be repeated, for it arrives back at the beginning, at the right side of Miriam, and this repetition could go on infinitely. The miniature thus unfolds like a choreographic record, a notational diagram capturing the structure of a performance.

Its location within the manuscript as a preface to the Odes section is extremely suitable, for here, in its revolving structure; the image displays the matrix of the *choros* and ensures its perpetual revolutions.¹⁷ Moses's song of thanksgiving or *asma* (song) from *aido* (»to sing«, »to rhapsodize«) is configured in its spatial dimension as Miriam's dance: verses/steps (*stichoi / stanzae*) marking and enclosing a hallowed ground of gold.

We can appreciate this duality of dance and song in the near-phonetic pair formed by the Greek terms *stichos* and *stoichos*. *Stichos* indicates a »row«, »line«, »series« and »order«. *Stoichos* comes from *stoicheion*, which in turn refers to »element«, »simple sound«, »sign of the zodiac«, and the »shadow of the *gnomon* of the sundial«, the length of which indicates the time of the day. Finally, *stoicheō* as the verb signifies »to be drawn in a line«, »to move in a sequence«.¹⁸ The range of meanings created by the

¹² On the Byzantine odes, see H. Schneider: Die biblischen Oden in Christlichen Altertum, *Biblica* 30, 1949, p. 28–68, 239–72, 433–52; Velimirović: Canticle, <URL: <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/04768#S04768.2> [19.08.2014]>.

¹³ Alexander Lingas: From Earth to Heaven: The Changing Musical Soundscape of Byzantine Liturgy, *Experiencing Byzantium*, eds. C. Nesbitt, M. Jackson, Farnham 2013, p. 311–358, esp. p. 336–358.

¹⁴ M. Heidegger, The Thing, in: *Poetry, Language, Thought*, edited and translated by A. Hofstadter, New York 1971, p. 163–180. For an example of how the *heirmos* of Ode 1 is used to pour into it the new poetry, see the troparia for the feast of *Hypapante* (Presentation of Christ in the Temple, February 2), <URL: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uBBFI-YwJe4> [19.08.2014]>.

¹⁵ Μίριαν ἡ ἀδελφὴ τοῦ Μωϋσῆ.

¹⁶ Compare this arrangement of verses to the canonical text of the First Ode in the *Septuaginta*, ed. Rahlfs 1975 (see note 1), Ex 15,1 – 6, and Odes 1,1 – 6.

¹⁷ For another Byzantine example of miniatures serving as synthesis and inauguration of a ritual, the eleventh-century lectionary (Florence, Biblioteca Medicea Lauren-

ziana, Ms. gr. 244), see Robert S. Nelson: Empathetic vision: Looking at and with a performative Byzantine miniature, in: *Art History XXX/4*, 2007, p. 489–502.

¹⁸ For the meaning of the Greek terms *stichos*, *stoichos*, *stoicheion*, *stoicheo*, and *stasinos*, see *A Greek-English lexicon*, compiled by Henry George Liddell/Robert Scott, Oxford 1968.

¹⁹ On the medieval Islamic sundial, see David A. King, article »Mizwala«, in: *The encyclopaedia of Islam*, Vol. VII, Leiden 1991, p. 210 f., and the quick synopsis in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, article »sundial« <URL: <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/573826/sundial> [22.02.09]>.

²⁰ Claude Calame: *Choruses of young women in ancient Greece*, Lanham 1997 [French original Rome 1977]; Leslie Kurke: Visualizing the choral: Epichoric poetry, ritual, and elite negotiation in fifth-century Thebes, in: *Visualizing the tragic: Drama, myth, and ritual in Greek art and literature. Essays in honor of Froma Zeitlin*, ed. by Chris Kraus et al., Oxford/New York 2007, p. 63–101. For further studies of the Greek *choros*, see *Arion* (see note 3), there in particular Helen H. Bacon: The chorus in Greek life and drama, p. 6–24 (on *choros* as the con-

near-phonetic pair of *stichos* and *stoichos* conveys the arrangement of simple elements in an orderly configuration that can ensure the preservation of order or *kosmos*.

Moreover, the configuration of the dancing women evokes the medieval Islamic sundial, which must also have been used by the Byzantines, marking the passage of time as a shadow cast by the *stoicheion* or *gnomon* on a round dial.¹⁹ The preface miniature thus doubles as a diagram of a sundial marking the order of the Byzantine daily prayer. The performance of the *kanon* becomes equated to steps executed in order of the Odes, continually returning to the Old Testament model melodies *heirmoi* as the base and inspiration for the Byzantine hymns or *troparia*.

As the »Thing« or container of the *kanon*, the miniature on fol. 449v allows us to consider how the *choros* of *stichoi* engenders sacred space in Byzantium. Archaic Greek poetry linked the singing/enunciation of verses with bodily movement in space and especially with the group dance of the *choros* of young men or women (*kouroi* and *kourai*), holding each other by the wrist and singing poetry to music. They circumambulated a sacred ground, an altar or a temple. With their dance and singing they expressed a veneration of the gods, mimetically reproducing in their bodies the imagined *choros* of the Three Charites and Nine Muses under the sound of Apollo's lyre.²⁰ The mortal *choros* created the conditions for divine reciprocation; the human performance functioned as a reflective surface that mirrored the divine. This intertwining of celestial and terrestrial is a defined as sacred space: a *chora*. *Charis*-grace marked the chiastic intertwining of human and divine.²¹ This linkage of celestial and terrestrial is identified in Greek by a series of words beginning with the aspiratory sound »ch« – *choros*, *chora*, *charis*, drawing attention to the exhalation of breath.²²

This emphasis on breath in the ancient matrix of *choros* found an expression in the sung office of the cathedral liturgy of Constantinople.²³ Here *choros* is identified in the chanted psalmody.²⁴ The sung office activated the resonant acoustics of the space, creating the conditions for an aural manifestation of divine response. The acoustic operations of Hagia Sophia can thus be likened to the Heideggerian »Thing«: a resonant container causing the exhaled human breath to express sonically aspects of the divine.²⁵

necting fabric between the evanescent earthly life and the incorruptible deathless world of the gods; and on the choral action as social action of integration into the community); Herbert Golder: Preface, p. 1–5 (again on *choros* as the link between humans and gods); Steven H. Lonsdale: Homeric hymn to Apollo: Prototype and paradigm of choral performance, p. 25–40 (on choral performance as evanescent entry into the divine realm); Albert Henrichs: Why should I dance: Choral self-referentiality in Greek tragedy, p. 56–111 (on *choros* as a site of performative poetry; on the transformative power of dance); Claude Calame: From choral poetry to tragic *stasimoi*: The enactment of women's song, p. 136–154 (on the transformation of choral action from the Archaic period's magical function to the hermeneutic one of the Classical Greek tragedy; on the altar, temple, or statues of the deity as a locus of choristic action). On *choros* as a site of performative poetry, see Thomas B. L. Webster: *The Greek chorus*, London 1970; William Mullen: *Choreia: Pindar and dance*, Princeton 1982); Steven H. Lonsdale: *Dance and ritual play in Greek religion*, Baltimore 1993.

²¹ On *choros* engendering sacred space or *chora*, see Nico-

letta Isar: Chorography (*chora*, *choros*): A performative paradigm of creation of sacred space in Byzantium, in: *Hierotopy I: The Creation of Sacred Spaces in Byzantium and Medieval Russia*, ed. by Aleksej M. Lidov, Moscow 2006, p. 59–90. On the interconnection of *chora* with *charis*, see Pentcheva 2009 (see note 5), p. 45–56, 155–182.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 155–182.

²³ On *choros* in the architecture of Hagia Sophia as revealed in the ekphrasis of Paul the Silentary and Prokopios, see Isar 2011 (see note 4), p. 97–209. On the link between Archaic *choros* and the Byzantine liturgy, and later with the epigrammatic poetry for icons, see Pentcheva 2009 (see note 5), p. 45–56, 155–182.

²⁴ Bissara V. Pentcheva, Performing the Sacred in Byzantium: Image, Breath, and Sound, *PRI Performance Research International* 19/3, 2014, p. 120–128 and *id.*, Icons of Sound: Ontology of the Image in Byzantium, *Critical Inquiry* 2015 forthcoming

²⁵ Pentcheva 2009 (see note 5), p. 93–111.

This understanding of *choros* as breath exhaled in a material container can be accessed also through the dedicatory inscription of Ms. Vat. gr. 752, fols. 17r – 17v. The poem clearly privileges the understanding of »dance« or *chorēgia* as chant:

Δανιΐηκή πέφυκα δέλτος ἀσμάτων·
φέρουσα τῷ γράψαντι φέρτατον κλέος·
θεόγραφον χάριν δὲ τῷ κεκτημένῳ·
καὶ μανθάνοντιν εὐκλεᾶ τὴν καρδίαν·
κ(αὶ) τοῖς βλέποντιν ἐνθεεστάτονς νόας·
ψάλλοντο δ' ἀσμα πν(εύματο)ς χορηγία(v).

(»I, the Davidic tablet [book] of Odes having been created,
continuously bestow to the author the best fame,
to the one who owns it – divinely-inscribed *charis*,
to the ones who know it – honorable heart.
to the ones who see it – most divine thoughts
to the ones who sing the odes – *pneumatic chorēgia*.«)²⁶

The poem builds a hierarchy starting with the fame bestowed on the author David and leading to the spiritual dance that becomes imprinted on the body of the singer of this poetry. By endowing the *stichoi* with breath, the chanter produces the condition for divine nearness.

The manuscript opens with this imagined pneumatic *chorēgia*. The dedicatory verses thus prepare the viewer and performer of this book to perceive the manuscript as a container of a spiritual chorography to which they should lend their breath. Although the preface miniature on fol. 449v visualizes a dance, ultimately the performance exacted is that of chant. To recognize the divine means to reproduce it in one's own body through measured breath, dividing time in discrete intervals of sung piety.

²⁶ The Greek of the dedicatory inscription is in DeWald 1941 (see note 2), p. xii.



Farbtafel 22 *The Dance of Miriam and the Israelite Women*, 1058–1059. Vatikanstadt, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Ms. Vat. gr. 752, fol. 449v

Abbildungsnachweise

Farbtafeln:

- 1 aus: *Il Duomo di Pisa* (Mirabilia Italiae, 3), hrsg. von Adriano Peroni, Modena 1995, Bd. I, Abb. 9 a, b, c. Mit freundlicher Genehmigung des Verlags
- 2 Collection Peter Norton (after Chantal Crousel/Kleinefenn).
- 3, 4 und 5 courtesy: Tel Aviv Museum
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